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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CONFLICT LIKELY TO CONTINUE

Classified By: A/POL Brian McFeeters. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The National Assembly's December extraordinary session, which ended on January 8, was fraught with strife. The session opened on December 10 and the next day the minor opposition Democratic Labor Party (DLP) quarreled with National Assembly security guards outside the Judiciary Committee, which was deliberating the real estate tax reform bill. From there, the situation went rapidly downhill. The ruling Grand National Party (GNP), with 172 of the 299 National Assembly seats, on December 13 rammed through the 2009 budget bill without consent from the main opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP). Buoyed by their party's success, GNP lawmaker and chair of the Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification (FATU) Committee Park Jin and other GNP committee members barricaded themselves in the committee room on December 18 and voted to send the Korea-U.S. FTA (KORUS FTA) to the plenary session for a vote. The DP, excluded from the proceedings, tried to break the committee room door down, but their sledgehammers were foiled by the spray from the security officials' fire extinguishers. To prevent the GNP from skipping deliberation in the committees and sending all 85 pending bills straight to the plenary for a vote, DP members occupied the main chamber and several committee rooms. Finally, after many failed negotiations, the GNP and the DP agreed on a deal that would address some of the legislation in the near term and put off the more controversial bills for discussion in February's regular session. The vague terms of the agreement already have the parties squabbling, making it likely that, instead of resolving their differences, the GNP and DP have merely postponed conflict until a later date. END SUMMARY.

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An Extraordinary Start  
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12. (SBU) The extraordinary session began on December 10 primarily to address a host of bills the government hoped to pass before the end of the year, including the 2009 budget -- the legal deadline for passage was December 2. Among other controversial aspects to the budget, opposition lawmakers were particularly skeptical about the administration's plan to improve the nation's four major rivers -- a project many saw as a precursor to Lee Myung-bak's widely disdained campaign pledge to build a canal across the Korean Peninsula.

13. (SBU) While the GNP and DP battled over the budget bill, the DLP used the start of the extraordinary session to

protest against government-proposed tax cut plans that, they claimed, favored the wealthy. A handful of labor party lawmakers -- they only control five seats -- and officials physically blocked a parliamentary committee on December 11 to prevent the committee's passage of the bill. National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-o condemned the DLP's actions and vowed to use "all (his) power" to ensure that both the tax cut and budget bills were put to a vote before midnight on December 11.

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GNP Rammed the Budget Through  
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¶4. (SBU) The parties failed to meet Kim Hyung-o's December 11 deadline. The primary point of contention over the budget was the scope of the reduction of funds allocated for projects that the ruling party claimed to be crucial for job creation and economic revitalization. These projects included the river improvement project and the construction of a national highway linking Pohang, the President's hometown, and Andong, a project the DP contended would unfairly benefit the constituency of Lee Sang-deuk, the President's elder brother. Frustrated with the DP's intransigence and with the DLP's continued occupation of the legislation committee room, on December 13, 184 lawmakers from the GNP, the Liberty Forward Party (LFP) and the Pro-Park Alliance voted for the budget, while DP legislators boycotted the vote.

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Clash Over DP's Exclusion from FATU  
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¶5. (C) On December 18, FATU Chair Park Jin decided to call for a committee vote to put the KORUS FTA on the agenda for discussion, thereby starting the ratification process. The DP, in protest to the GNP's unilateral passage of the budget bill, had boycotted all National Assembly committees since December 15. Using his committee chair authority to "maintain order," Park posted National Assembly security forces outside the committee room doors while he and nine other GNP lawmakers barricaded themselves inside. (NOTE: By law, a quarter of the total 29 committee members are necessary to send a bill forward.) The lawmakers included Chung Mong-joon, Nam Kyung-pil, Chung Jin-suk, Hwang Jin-ha, Kim Choong-whan, Lee Choon-sik, Gu Sang-chan, Chung Ok-nim and Hong Jung-wook. One of the lawmakers present told poloff that the GNP lawmakers had actually occupied the committee room since the night before in order to prevent the opposition parties from entering the room and preventing a vote. Park officially convened the committee at 14:00 on December 18, and within two minutes the committee had voted to approve the FTA.

¶6. (C) In an attempt to stop the unilateral move, some DP lawmakers along with their aides used sledgehammers and electric saws to attempt to break into the committee room but ultimately failed to break through the GNP's barricade. Park Jin told poloff that even though he took the preemptive step to occupy the room, his plan was to invite opposition members in for discussion. He said that due to the mass of people, the barricade and the fighting, he finally deemed it too dangerous to bring anyone else in for discussion and so called the meeting to order. Park was most upset with LFP lawmakers who said they would join the vote but pulled out at the last minute. Had they joined, it would have added more justification to his actions.

¶7. (C) Although GNP floor leader Hong Joon-pyo ultimately supported Park Jin's decision, GNP sources note that Hong initially told Park that the GNP strategy called for less controversial bills to be dealt with first, but Park reportedly ignored this guidance. Some FATU Committee GNP members also expressed their displeasure at being excluded from the vote, as the bill had not been completely agreed to within the GNP. Observers note that Park's motives were not solely pro-FTA, but that he also hoped to gain favor with

President Lee and be selected to replace Yu Myung-hwan as Foreign Minister in a cabinet shuffle expected early this year. The DP called the move anti-democratic, and, after the committee's decision, dozens of DP lawmakers occupied the office of National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-o to prevent further unilateral GNP action.

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DP Sit-in Drags On  
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18. (SBU) In the face of the GNP's vow to get 85 bills -- including the KORUS FTA -- passed before the end of the year, the DP and DLP, fed up with both the unilateral passage of the budget and the actions of the FATU committee, continued their occupation of the Speaker's office and committee rooms and, on December 26, moved into the National Assembly's main chamber where they eventually chained themselves to the Speaker's chair. According to Korean law, "In taking a vote, the Speaker shall proclaim at his seat the title of the matter to be voted on." With the Speaker unable to occupy his seat, no legislation could be put before the plenary for a vote.

19. (SBU) The year ended with started and stalled efforts to find some middle ground between the ruling and opposition parties. On December 29 Speaker Kim Hyung-o backed away from pushing all 85 bills through by the end of the year but vowed to put to a vote less controversial economic stimulus bills. He also ordered the DP to end its ongoing sit-in of the National Assembly's main chamber and warned he would "stretch his authority to the extreme" to restore order in the legislature. With the DP unwilling to back down, Kim ordered the National Assembly's security force to break up the sit-in and ordered the plenary chamber be cleared. Kim, however, desperate to broker a compromise, kept the guards stationed outside the Assembly as he continued to encourage the party leaders to negotiate. The GNP offered to delay passage of the most contentious bills until mid-February, but the DP continued to insist that a consensus first be reached.

110. (SBU) Finally, on January 3, opposition lawmakers fought with security guards as the latter tried to forcibly remove the DP lawmakers and staff who had occupied the entry hall outside the chamber. More than 150 guards stormed the building in three separate attempts to remove the DP lawmakers from the main hall, injuring one representative and about 20 aides and guards. Representative Park Byeong-seog, the DP's chief policy coordinator, was sent to a nearby hospital for a minor injury and the DP floor leader Won Hye-young's glasses were broken. In a statement, Kim Hyung-o said the guards would continue trying to clear the hall outside the main chamber before Monday. About 900 riot police stood guard outside the National Assembly to prevent those who were removed from the entry hall from climbing back in through windows to rejoin the fray. Police are legally barred from entering the building.

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A Compromise  
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111. (SBU) On January 4, with the DP lawmakers still chained to the Speaker's chair and no significant movement toward a compromise, Kim Hyung-o said that if rival parties failed to agree on contentious bills by January 8 -- the last day of the session -- he would carry them over into the next session instead of invoking his right to deliberate. The next day, in response to Kim's overtures, the DP ended their occupation of the rotunda outside the main chamber. The DLP, however, was not willing to go quietly and clashed with security guards. Kang Ki-gap, the party's leader, broke his hand during his scuffle with guards in the Speaker's office and is now facing charges -- along with several other lawmakers -- for excessive violence and destruction of property. (NOTE: It is likely Kang broke his hand when he punched the Speaker's door.)

¶12. (C) Although unpopular with the Blue House and many GNP lawmakers, Kim's decision helped pave the way for the eventual compromise -- however temporary it may prove -- between the GNP and the DP. In anticipation of an agreement, the DP ended its occupation of the legislative chamber on January 6. Later that day, the GNP, the DP, and the Liberty Forward-Create Korea coalition came to an agreement on the timing of 85 bills the government had hoped to pass before the National Assembly session ended on January 8. In exchange for ending the sit-in of the main chamber and committee rooms, the GNP agreed to delay a plenary vote on outstanding legislation. Instead, according to Representative Koh Seung-duk, about 60 of the bills went to the committees for discussion on January 7. The others -- including the KORUS FTA and the media reform bill -- will be addressed later in January or during the February session. Another extraordinary session started on January 9 to address the most pressing economic stimulus bills.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) The decision to postpone discussion of the bills rather than forcing them through the National Assembly was, perhaps, a necessary compromise, but it enables the DP to drag the process out and slows progress on legislation. More clashes are likely in February when the GNP will table the controversial "social reform" bills. Discussions of reforming the Assembly to prevent clashes like those that have taken place in the last month are underway. Unfortunately, these kind of fights are nothing new, and, until the opposition -- be it conservative or progressive -- has a legitimate means of objecting to legislation (some have proposed introducing a U.S.-style filibuster system), they are likely to continue.

STEPHENS